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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study of the changes that Czech education has undergone over the last decade. Many of these changes have been of a fundamental and significant nature, and have had an essential and relatively long-lasting influence on the form and behavior of the system. These changes have had their impact on the roles of people within the system as well. There have been a variety of reforms, and also a number of efforts to manage them. The study asks whether these changes have really been managed in a sophisticated way (supported by the theory of change and its management) or have been subject to improvisation by people, who usually have good intentions, but no appropriate knowledge, skills, or experience. The setting up and starting of the activities of school-governing bodies is used as an example in the study to look at whether the present situation in Czech schools is the result of qualified management or rather of improvisation. Findings indicate that the activities to launch school-governing bodies cannot be regarded as mere improvisation. However, generally speaking, these efforts do not reflect the theory and the practical experience of those who are experts in the management of organizational change. Consequently, 10 years after a fundamental socioeconomic breakthrough in Czech society, school-governing boards remain on the periphery of what schools, parents, and others are interested in. (Contains 10 references.) (DFR)

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The Case of Launching School Governing Bodies

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Changes in Czech Education - Improvisation or a Controlled Process? The Case of Launching School Governing Bodies

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In the last decade, Czech education underwent quite a considerable number of changes. Many of them were of fundamental nature and significance, having essential and relatively long-lasting influence on the form and behaviour of the system and its parts. These changes have had their impact on the roles and possibilities of people within the system. Other changes were having similar ambitions, yet their impact was less visible - sometimes they lasted short, sometimes they missed their point and have not had almost any positive effect. We have witnessed a variety of changes and also a number of efforts to manage them. Such a situation has been determined by many factors - hurry, lack of experience, low level of readiness of the changes' performers on almost all levels, frequent alterations of staff in key positions of the system (consequently frequent alterations of priorities). Even today, a question remains to be answered: Are the changes of the Czech education system really managed in a sophisticated way (supported by the theory of change and its management, local traditions as well as foreign experience), or are they rather subject to improvisation of people who usually have good intentions but no appropriate knowledge, skills and experience?

We have no intention to search for a detailed answer. Using the example of setting up and starting the activities of school-governing bodies (SGBs) we will try to suggest whether and why the present situation is a result of qualified management or rather of improvisation.

For this purpose we will use or modify the existing schemes. We have put together the chronology of steps using the change phases (adoption, implementation, incorporation) as suggested by Lagerweij (1991) and the cycle of change (diagnose, planning, realisation, evaluation) as indicated e.g. by Hopkins et al., (1994), Lunenberg, (1998), etc. So, our chronology of change phases consists of the following:

(0.) change of the society's values and priorities
1. diagnosis of the situation, needs analysis
2. acceptance of the idea of a specific change (change adoption)
3. change implementation
4. change incorporation
5. evaluation

Such a scheme has its limits but we believe it helps to understand the reality more profoundly.

EA 031095

„Phase zero" has been put into brackets, as it is the essential phase, predetermining the existence of all the others, but we do not include it into the framework of management of the organisational or educational change. Evaluation is herewith considered as a process which goes through all the change phases and is being realized at the very end of the chronology of steps.

Due to the limited space, not much attention to the situation diagnosis and its needs is paid in this paper, neither to the process of accepting the idea of change. More space is devoted to change implementation, as this is the field where quite many things have happened recently. We will also have a brief look at the phase of change incorporation and evaluation.

1. Despite the existence of quite a number of educational reform proposals (submitted by different Czech institutions, such as NEMES, IDEA, Teacher Union, Prague Faculty of Education, Ministry of Education, Union of Czech Mathematicians and Physicists, to name the most distinguished ones), it was not before the second half of the 1990's when some efficient efforts to **diagnose the situation** appeared in the Czech Republic (České, 1999, Zprávy, 1996). It was, in fact, impossible to rely on any systematic analysis any earlier; one could only speculate about the real needs of the Czech milieu in this field.

2. The **acceptance of the idea of change (adoption)** emerged from the general shift of social values and priorities, rather than from the knowledge of the needs of education. As for the SGBs, the importance of taking into consideration the principial factors of this phase was underestimated, anyway (see Fullan, 1993, Lagerweij, 1995). Among these factors, the most important role was played by *the relation between innovation and existing needs, the clarity of the content of the proposed innovation, the stimulation of the environment, the availability of resources, and the character of the content of the innovation. It had been neglected to consider, especially, the relative advantage of the change for the involved, the compatibility with already existing views and beliefs, the extent of complexity, possibility of an in-advance-test of the change, or the observability of the results.*

3. During the **implementation phase**, the key points are, besides *the character of the content of innovation* (see above), *the type and the individual character of the school* and *the social environment* (external support, the Ministry's policy, etc.). As for the school's type and individual character, the following is especially to be mentioned:

The school's previous experience with the innovation. Typically, the idea to set up an SGB in a school came from outside. Generally, such a way of starting changes in schools does not lead to very good results.

Process of accepting the idea of change in the school. SGBs were even more difficult in this respect, as they suffered from diversion of their performers at different system levels, from a lack of unity of their opinions on job descriptions and competencies, and sometimes from a certain variety of interests, discouraging from joint actions. It seems that the the strongest emphasis should have been put on working with school people themselves, or those from its closest environment. This was, very often, not the case.

School leaders' adherence to the change. A paradox appeared: while school headteachers were given the principal role in the process of SGBs introduction, they were deprived of the membership therein. Being convinced of their own values and opinions, school headteachers anyway did not firmly believe in the benefit and meaningfulness of SGBs (sometimes they even perceived them as a threatening element to them). The process was not supported by systematic and effective enough work with headteachers.

Teachers' professionalism. Teachers were not considered as the decisive element of the SGBs. (Was this the influence of "teacherless" management styles, traditional in Czech schools?) Communication among teachers, their support to SGBs, and their role in the process of transferring the idea into school classes and to parents, however, could have had some very positive impact. It seems that many teachers did not accept the meaningfulness of the SGBs, and they were not offered enough aid to do so. Another burden was the complicated relation between teachers and parents.

Phasing and information control. The whole process has consisted of two sub-phases: the experimental set-up of SGBs (1993-1995), and the nation-wide launching of SGBs into the school system (1995-present). These phases were preceeded by an uncoordinated, "pre-experimental" period (1991-1993) when the idea of SGBs at schools was not yet generally discussed and only particular initiatives (inspired by the Act of State and Self-Administration in Education and the Association Act). Efforts to get the feedback of the process were but exceptional.

The management of the implementation phase lacked, among other things, in its inner consistence, coordination, and communication. In fact, the very realisation became a job for non-stimulated schools and their partners.

4. The point of the long-term process of the **change incorporation phase** is to make sure that the change becomes a fixed and natural part of an organisation or system. The quality of the incorporation phase is being influenced by similar factors to those influencing the implementation: *involvement of the Ministry*, *acceptance of the idea "behind" the innovation*, *external help*, *existence of internal help*, *involvement of school leaders*, *implementation into the class*.

The way of implementation determines both the very existence and the character of the next phase. The fact that the total number of SGBs is not growing nor remaining the same, but decreasing, leads us to the conclusion that, in most cases, the incorporation phase is in fact not being carried out.

5. Evaluation (final and continuous). It seems that the SGBs introduction process and the present situation thereof has not been evaluated so far in a profound manner. Except for some information on the poor quantitative results (in 1997-98 SGBs existed at mere 4% of schools) there has been no report on the process of setting up and developing SGBs. Yet the Education Act bill, issued for public discussion in May 1999, assumes that "an SGB will be set up at every basic and secondary school as well as at higher vocational colleges, and if suggested by authorised representatives of children it can also be set up at kindergartens" (Věcný, 1999:32). Also, the bill outlines the functions of SGBs, these being, basically, of two kinds - controlling and advisory. The SGB should become a "school legal entity", except for the headteacher the most important legal body in education.

To what extent has the available experience of launching SGBs been evaluated?

Conclusion:

The activities to launch SGBs cannot be regarded as mere improvisation. However, generally speaking, these efforts do not reflect the theory and the practical experience of those who can have their expert word in the management of organisational change. This has been quite clearly indicated by the manner in which almost all involved parties deal with most factors influencing the success of change phases. This approach has been shown by both those who are directly part of the educational system and those who operate outside it. It seems that the main part of responsibility remains with the initiators of change, i. e. central bodies. Consequently, ten years after the fundamental socio-economic breakthrough in the Czech

society, SGBs remain on the periphery of what schools, parents, and other subjects are interested in.

In 1996 we concluded our survey rather sceptically: "Generally, the situation still does not seem very favourable. On one hand, there is a consensus about the very idea of local school governance and school governing bodies as an essential element thereof. On the other hand, nobody seems really ready or interested to materialise this idea." (Pol, Rabušicová, 1996:109). There is nothing to be changed on this statement in 2000.

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